

IRU submission: Coalition's Online Higher Education Working Group

The IRU welcomes the interest from the Coalition in forming the Online Higher Education Working Group to examine the changes in online and digital learning for the potential they have to change the nature of higher education delivery.

The opportunities are clear:

- to change substantially the way in which all students are taught;
- to improve access to higher education for people right across Australia; and
- to give greater access to Australian higher education to potential students around the world, particularly for people in Asian countries where the gap between demand for higher education and local provision remains substantial.

Building off the IRU discussion with the Working Group on 21 March 2013 we emphasise the following points:

- the opportunities for digital technologies affect all higher education provision, substantially reducing the distinction between being an on-campus student and a distance learning student. It is thus a whole of higher education challenge;
- IRU members, and indeed all Australian universities, are responding to the digital challenges and opportunities, continuing to develop as universities always have. This places an even stronger emphasis on the capacity of universities to guide and support students through their learning, rather than simply providing content for their consumption;
- there is an important distinction between the delivery of an educational course and individuals undertaking self-education and development through accessing the widening array of information available. The latter tends to feed the former, rather than replace it;
- ensuring the quality of formal higher education qualifications is paramount. Efficiencies in delivery must support quality of provision and not undermine it.
 - The transition to substantial digitally delivered teaching and resources requires major reworking of university infrastructure.
 - The development of digital materials for courses, including use of those available online, takes considerable work.
 - Support for students remains a paramount responsibility, the form may change but the need remains
- universities' flexibility to pursue cross institutional teaching allowing students greater freedom to select among institutions to meet their interests is constrained by regulatory assumptions of a single provider.

These points act to give greater depth to the discussion about the future delivery of higher education. The Working Group can support this through recommendations to:

- recognise that learning technologies are increasingly utilised in all learning modalities;
- ensure higher education regulation and Government funding requirements are truly neutral about the mode of delivery to focus on the value of the outcome students achieve;
- support promotion of the suite of study options in Asian markets, allowing online options to grow;
- support infrastructure renewal in universities to ensure digital capability is widely available and current buildings and other facilities are renewed for education in 21st century; and
- address the legal questions about use of information online to align copyright and other laws to changes in the nature of information storage and access.

Digital technologies and higher education provision

The rapid appearance of MOOCs, (online courses available to anyone who wishes to enrol but with minimal academic security and authentication, and no formal qualification or credit flowing from undertaking them), has stimulated much discussion about how higher education is delivered and how it should be in the future. This discussion has gone far beyond those usually interested in the subject, stimulating a welcome surge of interest. The formation of the Working Group is one example of the interest raised.

It is positive to have a discussion about how universities teach, rather than focus on the resourcing questions. However the flurry of interest in MOOCs and other claims for massive change driven by digital technologies shows a gap between what universities are doing in response to these opportunities and public understanding that change is occurring.

The Ernst and Young report, *University of the future A thousand year old industry on the cusp of profound change*, is a useful case for outlining the opportunities and challenges but assuming that universities have not changed over time and are not willing to keep doing so (see Comment on this report at end of this Submission).

The question of how best to provide higher education – how to teach well to ensure students achieve desired learning outcomes - has always been a concern of the university. However, it has been over the past ten to twenty years that there has been considered, focussed work to spread good teaching across the whole university based on study of what approaches and techniques work, both generally and within each discipline, and for the wide range of students most universities enrol.

High level evidence for this is the creation in every university of units focussed at teaching and learning outcomes, headed by senior university staff. Key to this work is the argument that it is not sufficient to give students access to good information and expect that they will then acquire the needed knowledge and skills without guidance. The argument applies as much to the high achieving school leaver as to the student who enters at 25 following some years in the workforce and a mixed schooling record.

The need for guidance is crucial to the debate about the impact of digital technologies. Much of the emphasis is upon the rapid expansion in information available through the internet. If access to information were all that mattered then there would be a substantial change in educational outcomes. However, for a valid higher education qualification the issue is much more about ensuring a structured approach to learning including, notably in this regard, developing a critical capacity to analyse information, engagement with students about their progress and ultimately a statement that the student has acquired a body of knowledge and skills meeting the expectations of the qualification awarded.

The changes in how universities deliver courses are bringing closer together the on-campus experience and traditional distance education. Students formally based on campus will undertake many elements of their course using digital materials, receiving them the same way as a student doing so from home.

The role of the academic staff member and the various academic support staff is changing in line with this. Options for course content are much wider, but the requirement to select and guide remains, while IRU staff, as all others, contribute their knowledge and expertise to the array of information available to their students and to students around the world.

There are complications about opening up use of digital technologies. The legal issues about use and reuse of materials taken from a wide range of sources can hamper putting online all course materials or requiring strict access controls so that only enrolled students can use the materials. Copyright and related laws are yet to catch up with current or desired practice.

Qualifications and self-education

Distinguishing between ways people can inform themselves in areas of interest from formal certified learning is important. The arrival of MOOCs, as the currently emphasised example of digital delivery, is seen as either:

- a fundamental change in higher education, because most delivery will move to online based delivery with large numbers undertaking the same process. The implicit scare factor is that this will (nearly) all be done from somewhere else; or
- the latest version of adult self-driven learning that will operate in parallel to formal qualification based learning. We think this is a more realistic description.

There has been much reference to the university thousand year tradition being overturned, implying that universities today are essentially the same as those founded in the early 1200s in England and elsewhere in Europe. Since that time there have been many advances in how information and knowledge can be transmitted, the creation of the printed book (basic, open organised content) being one very notable example.

As information has become more easily available more people have taken advantage of that but the needs for formal education have grown in parallel. Hence there has been a reasonable correlation between increases in self-education options and the expansion of formal learning expectations. The question is whether the digital changes are consistent with this or overturn it.

The university (and other provider of formal qualifications) retains a crucial role in two related aspects:

- to provide guidance and stimulation as a person works through the array of possible material, so that time is well used and a coherent body of knowledge is gained;
- to provide formal certification that a person has indeed gained the expected knowledge and skills.

While much is made of people's capacity to find their own sources and to choose from among the array of options available there is a counter trend that many students want to be told what to study and wish to work only to the extent required to meet assessment requirements. It is not sensible to believe there remains no good role for universities and other providers.

Quality and efficiency

The Working Group asks the important question about whether the digital technologies offer considerable efficiency in delivery. At its heart the scope for a major efficiency gain comes if considerable more students can be taught without increasing staff numbers.

The answer comes back to the question of what is expected of a degree or other qualification. Universities are responsible for certifying that a valid body of knowledge and skills have been acquired. This involves structuring the knowledge to be acquired, supporting the student and being confident of their ultimate learning outcome.

Universities now face ongoing expectations to renew and upgrade information technology that supports digital delivery and to restructure learning spaces to support changed modes of learning. This is an annual requirement, in contrast to past periods when major infrastructure would have life spans of several years if not decades. This needs to be done within existing buildings not built with digitally-enhanced delivery in mind.

Distance education is a long tradition in Australia, with the mode of providing resources and teaching support continuing to change as new technologies become available. The cost of distance delivery has never been shown to be significantly less than for a class room based mode, primarily due to the

need for active staff involvement. Efficiencies in staff outputs have been high over past decades but these apply to all modes of delivery.

Flexibility and degrees

All universities have arrangements to allow students to include units from other institutions in their degree, for students to switch degrees mid program with credit, and extensive recognition of previous study at enrolment. These are not necessarily smooth but they exist and should be improved.

Key to such arrangements is surety of quality. The rules universities have about what can or cannot be combined to complete a degree go to the essential responsibility of universities, set down in their establishment Acts, to issue qualifications based on confidence that the graduate has demonstrated they have met the requirements of the degree.

To overcome the pressure on individual languages in each university the IRU is developing an IRU Asian Languages Network to make better use of the knowledge and skills of the small number of staff supporting each Asian language. This will share the teaching of the languages giving all IRU students access to staff across the Network improving the depth of teaching. This will use the rapidly growing capacity of the internet to support language learning.

The opportunity for Australians to enrol in institutions from other countries is now greater but there has been no major rush to do so. This reflects the evident fact that Australia's university system is among the better ones in the world as shown by the acceptance of Australian graduates internationally and university performance in international rankings, driven largely by research metrics.

International education and the digital changes

Australia's market in international education now mixes students coming to Australia for all or part of their qualification and access to initial years of a qualification through to the whole degree at a partner institution in countries around the world. This market is driven by the gap in the home countries between demand for higher education and the local system's capacity. These however continue to grow, as to date has demand.

The Working Group rightly is considering whether more students from other countries could enrol through online delivery, particularly people in Asia. To date demand for online delivery from Asia has been modest, with expatriates much of the market. This is due to families in Asia being conservative, as a broad generalisation, identifying a campus based enrolment as a real university education.

For online delivery to be competitive it will need to demonstrate the quality associated with an Australian degree, the quality that drives people to pay for the degree. It must also sit with the onshore provision, offering a comparable outcome through a different mode.

Universities and other providers

The IRU submission naturally focusses on the response of its member universities to the digital opportunities. There are many non-university providers in Australia and their number is growing. These focus on niche areas, if delivery a bachelor degree, or on shorter term qualifications that usually build off a bachelor degree. As the array of possibilities for learning grow, universities will remain dominant as providers of bachelor degrees but will be one of many in the broader adult learning market. This is about growth in the education market, not replacement of the current dominant group.

How to support effective take up of digital opportunities

The sections above are intended to show that universities are responding to the opportunities from digital technology and will continue to be major players in the Australian higher education system.

The question is how, if in Government, the Coalition could strengthen outcomes for Australia's students and institutions.

The areas for action we recommend to the Working Group are:

1. to ensure higher education regulation and Government funding requirements are truly neutral about the mode of delivery to focus on the value of the outcome students achieve;
2. support promotion of the suite of study options in Asian markets, allowing online options to grow;
3. support infrastructure renewal in universities to ensure digital capability is widely available and current buildings and other facilities are renewed for education in 21st century; and
4. address the legal questions about use of information online to align copyright and other laws to changes in the nature of information storage and access.

9 April 2013

Attachment: A comment on Ernst and Young

The Ernst and Young report has attracted much comment, building off the interest in the impact of digital technologies and its predictions that some or many universities will disappear if they do not act now to change. It is useful to remember that the report is from a consultancy group which seeks to advise universities and assist with change programs.

The Report rightly points to the opportunities and challenges ahead:

- demand for higher education growing both within Australia and particularly in many countries in Asia, South America and Africa;
- use of digital resources and mechanisms is changing how information is found and learnt, challenging universities to adapt.

However, it exaggerates:

- the medium term pressure on Government funding in Australia, ignoring the recent increases in funding and the current commitment to higher education funding from both sides of politics; and
- competition for students by not distinguishing between:
 - competition for the students always likely to go to university; and
 - attracting new students to university which expands the pool of students. To date all universities have increased their funded places since 2008. Its discussion of market share is limited by not acknowledging the overall growth in the market. For example in 1960 The University of Melbourne had 100% or close to of the Victorian market. It now has a much lower proportion (around 20%) but significantly more students and a more larger operation across all spheres.

It shows little sense of how universities have developed over time. Despite the references to universities' thousand year history (which exaggerates the time period) the university model which the report relies upon is of universities as at 1995. There is no sense that universities have changed considerably over the decades and expect to keep doing so in the future. The lack of historical depth greatly weakens the argument that universities will struggle to meet the current challenges.

Finally it suffers from the weakness, which it alleges of universities, of not adapting to the world changing around it. A particular example is the focus on the balance of staff between academic and non-academic positions. Highlighting the high proportion of non-academic staff the report shows no awareness that the changes it wishes to highlight are also driving changes in staff roles with many positions in teaching support roles that make the technology available and associate it learning materials with it.